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‘Boots on the Ground’: walking in occupied Palestinian territory

Patricia Sellick

Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom

Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations

Coventry University
Priory Street

Coventry

CV1 5FB

patricia.sellick@coventry.ac.uk

Dr Patricia Sellick is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University.

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Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil is a trail 330kms long in the Palestinian West Bank. The object of this research is the social *nonmovement*, to borrow a term from Asef Bayat, of walkers from the USA and Europe and their Palestinian hosts. Based on her own experience of walking and on interviews with other international visitors, the author concludes that this social *nonmovement* connects places along the trail (and beyond), walkers to each other and the people they encounter, and plural narratives of affective solidarity. These findings unsettle the idea of securitised territorial solutions and invite the possibility of continuous, open geographies.

Keywords: walking, Palestine, place, embodied mobility, international intervention

Subject classification codes: include these here if the journal requires them

Introduction

The *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* [Abraham Path] is a trail 330kms long in the Palestinian West Bank starting from the village of Rummana, north of Jenin, and ending at Beit Mirsim in the hills southwest of Hebron. To walk the whole trail takes 21 days. The Palestinian organisers of the way-marked path invite people to walk the trail accompanied by a Palestinian guide and to stay overnight in Palestinian homes along the way. In this article I ask, what is the significance of walking the trail in terms of the occupied Palestinian territory as a place, the relationship of the international visitors to each other and the Palestinians who live along the trail, and the affective memory of the stories that they tell each other along the way?

The article begins by examining the literature related to embodied mobility, walking, and in particular walking in occupied Palestinian territory. The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau Ponty (1976) is key to the meaning attributed in this article to walking and in particular, his (ontological and epistemological) insight that

there cannot be one absolute meaning, rather there can only ever be incomplete and contingent perspectives. The article then makes a detour to discuss the literature related to the spatial practices of international intervention in conflict with particular reference to the work of Lisa Smirl (2015; 2016) and goes on to develop the link between these perspectives within mobilities research and the interdisciplinary field of peace studies (Lederach 2005; Loyd 2012a; Björkdahl 2017; Harrowell 2018). A methodology section outlines how the author's own experience of walking in the West Bank underpins the eighteen qualitative interviews with international interveners who have walked all or part of the trail. Research findings are then organized around a similar conceptual grid to that adopted by Johanna Mannergren Slimovic (2018) in her analysis of everyday agency and transformation in East Jerusalem: place, body and story. Walking the trail is shown to be constitutive of a politics that connects the places along the trail (and beyond), the walkers to each other and the people they encounter (and their extended social relations), and an affective memory of stories that invite solidarity.

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1977), Cresswell (1996) and Bayat (2010), the politics of place and people that emerges is not identified by borders or by exclusive identities, but by how the walkers deal with the world as they find it, taking for granted that they will arrive safely at their destination, navigating between what they perceive to be in place or at home and what they perceive to be out of place or transgressive. These findings are significant for peace studies because they indicate how to change the conversation. These pedestrian practices of people, who are not particularly distinguished by courage or commitment, unsettle the hegemonic idea of binary, territorial solutions made physical by concrete, barbed wire, and checkpoints with human armed guards and remote surveillance systems, and invite the possibility of continuous, open geographies. The mundane practice of walking and doing what seems

‘natural’ while walking: moving between places, listening and talking side-by-side as equals, and taking for granted that it is safe to give and accept hospitality from a stranger, demonstrate the transformative potential of the ordinary.

Walking: Embodied mobility

Walking a trail implies a walker who walks a path, a subject who moves intentionally from one place to another over time. This experience is embodied and affective, and is grounded in the trodden earth, the walker’s perception of the rock underfoot, the sweat trickling down the back of her neck, and the sound of a startled bird: the only possible perspective is individual. For Merleau Ponty (1976; 2003) the subject, together with his or her sensations and praxis, was always ‘institué’ (situated, placed or contingent): perception could be said to involve not only the thinking body but also the incarnated mind. In his article ‘Labyrinth of Incarnations’ Edward Said proposes that Merleau Ponty’s most original contribution to psychology was the way in which he demonstrated that ‘we use our body to know the world; space and time are not abstractions but almost-entities that we haunt and inhabit’ (Said 2012b). Space and time are ‘almost-entities’ because the individual’s perspective is always partial and incomplete. The individual walker only experiences that stretch of the path in that season in that particular weather, however, the path is there, because it has been trodden by other people who moved across the same space at other times. Walking a path is to experience alterity and mobility and to become one among many walkers, to become part of geography and become part of history: it is an individual experience of becoming in relationship to others in what Doreen Massey has called space/time (Massey 1994, 249-272).

For Massey, the spatial organization of society is integral to the production of the social, not merely its result. Just as the phenomenologist understood individual

perspective to be partial or incomplete, Massey views places as open and porous. Specificity is constructed through interrelations rather than through the imposition of boundaries and the counter position of one identity against another. It is from this ontological and epistemological point of departure, characterised by contingency and coexistence, where agency is located at the intersection of place- and space-making, that I have approached the extensive literature related to walking (Thoreau 1980; Crust et al. 2011; Solnit 2014; Ingold and Vergunst 2016; Hall, Ram, and Shoval 2018), and the rich trove of writing related to walking in occupied Palestinian territory explored in greater detail below.

As Murid Barghūthī crossed the Allenby Bridge from Jordan and saw 'the Occupied Territory' he perceived the transformation of the territory reported on news bulletins into place:

> When the eye sees it, it has all the clarity of earth and pebbles and hills and rocks. It has its colors and its temperatures and its wild plants too. Who would dare make it into an abstraction now that it has declared its physical self to the senses? (Barghūthī 2004,6)

The difference between the two-dimensional imagined space and the experience of being in a place is also underlined by Raja Shehadeh's title *Palestinian Walks: forays into a vanishing landscape* (2014). The preposition 'into' implies that the walker becomes enclosed within the transient landscape. In another book title, *A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle* (2011) Shehadeh emphasises the way in which place is not only about being in, but also about being with. There are multiple authors who have walked in the company of Shehadeh, for example, Robert Macfarlane includes a chapter in *The Old Ways* (2013, 209-232) where he walks with Shehadeh near Ramallah. Macfarlane describes how, in common with Said (Wainwright 2005), Shehadeh disliked using maps when he walked 'because each official map (Israeli or British Mandate or

Ottoman) had its own colonial biases ... Raja had preferred to develop what he called his "map in the head", signposted by personal memories and references' (2013, 221).

The map in Shehadeh's head is made up of the social relations in which he participates and the plural subject-positions they construct. This thinking in terms of relations is 'a move, in terms of political subjects and of place, which is anti-essentialist, which can recognize difference, and which yet can simultaneously emphasize the bases for potential solidarities' (Massey 1994, 8). It is this last point that intersects with the next area of literature to be discussed.

The Spatial Practices of International Intervention

In the wider literature related to international visitors walking in occupied Palestinian territory (including East Jerusalem) walking is discussed as a form of tourism (Isaac 2010; Isaac and Ashworth 2011) and pilgrimage (Bajc 2007). The *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* itself features in the Routledge International Handbook of Walking (Isaac 2017) as a powerful leisure resource. However, from an analysis of the walkers interviewed for this research and from personal observation, the majority of the international visitors walking the *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* are neither tourists nor pilgrims. Instead these walkers make their living as diplomats, military and security reform advisors, aid-workers, journalists, academics (peace and conflict researchers) and other peacebuilding 'practitioners'. They belong to the 'international community' that could be defined by saying, if there were no violent conflict, these visitors would not be there (Heathershaw 2016). Their visits are based on the premise that something is wrong and that through their intervention whatever is wrong will be put right, or at the very least they will do no harm (Jabri 2016, 254). The gaze of these international visitors is not the tourist's gaze (Urry 2011): for most of them the occupied Palestinian territory is their place of work or study, because of its construction as a place of undesirable violence. In addition, the

gaze of these international interveners is filtered by ideas about the necessity of structural change to achieve externally generated development goals (Le More 2005; Le More 2008; Tartir 2015; Tannira 2018); a professionalism based not only on the extent and form of their knowledge but on who they are and where they come from (Watenpaugh 2015, 5; Kothari 2005, 426); and the malleability of Palestinians as subjects of their interventions (Gordon 2008; Perugini and Gordon 2015).

Keith Watenpaugh traces the origins of modern humanitarianism to the Eastern Mediterranean in the interwar years. For Watenpaugh the reason of humanitarianism pivoted not on the rights of the victim of war or genocide, but on the humanity of those providing assistance and, to a lesser extent, the humanity of those receiving it (2015, 21). Since 1948 US and European aid workers have travelled to Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the wider Middle East out of conviction that they have the technical expertise necessary to ameliorate or fix the wrong (Gallagher 2007; Watenpaugh 2015). Critical researchers are questioning whether the latest generation of cosmopolitan bureaucrats associated with UN, US and EU assistance to the Palestinians are producing any useful commodity for the local population or whether it is more accurate to say that they are producing services for, and are accountable to, the 'donor' countries (Le More 2005; Challand 2010; Qassoum 2017; Tannira 2018; Qassoum 2017).

If they cut themselves off from the societies which they have come to advise, aid, report on, or study, these international interveners have an experience of symbolic and physical protection. Lisa Smirl has argued cogently that the culture of separation of international visitors, who rotate from one conflict zone to another, preceded the securitized hardening of the aid world's built and engineered environment. She draws on Taylor's social imaginary and others, to analyse the way in which the material and

spatial practices of the international community in the space of 'the field' need to be understood as an extension of their space of origin. In particular, the spatial demarcation of the space of the international is crucial to the survival and perpetuation of the primacy of the knowledge and goals generated elsewhere, and the confidence that there is something to fix and that only international intervention can fix it. According to Smirl 'spaces and the built environment are not only stages upon which we perform, but integral and constitutive of the performance itself' (2015).

Smirl considers three spaces of aid: cars, compounds and hotels (2015; 2016). Working within these spaces are both 'international' and 'local' staff, a distinction the usefulness of which is increasingly contested (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; 2016). For example, Ahmed Tannira has analysed the way foreign funding has reconfigured Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip and created a new Palestinian élite who are 'local' staff but adopt the mores of international organisations (2018). Similar patterns have been found in Northern Ireland where employees of the European funded NGOs adopt the priorities of the funders (Mitchell and Kelly 2011). Smirl (2016) recognises that the international space of aid is porous: in the case of Bosnia she shows how 'local' staff of the Holiday Inn demonstrate behaviours of solidarity between identity groups which do not conform to the externally generated 'front-stage narrative of ethnic homogeneity and grievance'. She also shows how, despite their knowledge of the 'back-stage behaviours,' the international interveners promote and circulate the same antagonistic identity-based analysis. The space of the international interveners in the occupied Palestinian territory is porous too.[i] The *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* invites international visitors to walk the length of the West Bank, staying not in hotels, but in Palestinian homes. Although the number of individual walkers is not fully measurable, *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* staff reported to the World Bank that between 2008 and 2014 as

many as 4,000 travellers in organized groups had walked the path,[ii] and this number rose in the single calendar year 2016 to 3,675.[iii]

Embodied mobility, spatial practices of international interveners, and the link with peace studies

Contingency, which is critical to the ontology of all the writers referenced so far, requires a view of space that is dynamic and of time which is not spaceless (Massey 1994, 264). Such a conception of space and time does not fit two linear axes and is instead four dimensional, reflecting the simultaneous coexistence of social relations that are in flux. As well as being attracted to the phenomenological thinking of Merleau Ponty, Edward Said was drawn to the geographical, territorial and spatial terminology of Gramsci in which the basic social contest is the one over hegemony that is 'the control of essentially heterogeneous, discontinuous, non-identical, and *unequal* geographies of human habitation and effort' (Said 2012a, 467). In his reflections Said emphasises the physical contingency of the writer himself, undercut by the momentary nature of his position and his inability to write for all time. This inescapable positionality informs the criticism made by John Paul Lederach of peace processes and their imagined linear progress from escalation to war then de-escalation to agreement and peace. Spaceless time encourages us to think in lines, in causes and effects; Lederach encourages us to think instead of 'ongoing social and relational spaces'(2005, 47) within which power in all its dimensions operates and war and peace may coexist. Conceiving of these relations spatially reveals the way in which both violent and peaceful relations are produced and reproduced in space, and conversely space is itself transformed by violent and peaceful relations (Harrowell 2018, 240-247; Björkdahl 2017). As Lederach noted '*relationship* is the basis of both the conflict and its long term solution' (1997). With this critical spatial understanding of how both peaceful and

violent relations are entangled within the same space it is possible to grasp how a walker may pass unharmed 330kms through the West Bank without denying that others, living off the trail, are deeply harmed by simultaneous and ongoing coercive and structural violence.

Methodology

I have walked the 330kms length of the *Masar Ibrahim al Khalil*, when it was first being mapped and way-marked, walking most weekends between 2009-2012. As researchers have found in Northern Ireland, walking itself is a method of accessing spaces whose status and ownership is indeterminate, and in which the conditions created by constant and always incomplete transformation are used to justify intensive models of control.

> By walking—rather than, say, driving or remaining static in one place—one is also able to transgress certain boundaries and partitions of space created by the structures in question, for instance by moving between two neighbourhoods or passing through a security gate. (Mitchell and Kelly 2011, 309)

I come to the writing of this article carrying with me my own memories of walking. The trail is the trail of my senses, my body, and my experiences.[iv] The trail is almond groves north of Jenin; a rusted Ferris wheel; learning that the cyclamen is known in Arabic as the Shepherd's Crook; the flavour of a farmer's gift of fresh cucumbers; the remains of the route of the Hijaz railway leading to Amman and Damascus; the number of children that can pile on a donkey; families picnicking near the springs of Wadi Al Auja; and everywhere the ways in which people have relied on water from wells, cisterns and canals; the comfort of walking at night in the desert; rubbish blowing around the chaotic sprawl of housing round Bethlehem; Hebron's

traders selling shoes to China; disused cave dwellings; finding ’*aqub* plant, thistle-like and tasty; the grey concrete slabs of the Wall.

Are walkers transformed by the experience of walking and if so how? To answer this question, I developed a questionnaire and during the period April-May 2018 a research assistant currently based in Jerusalem interviewed eighteen walkers before, during, or after a walk. Some of the walkers had walked the length of the trail over 21 days. Others had walked tens of times over several years. A few had just had one day’s walking experience. All the interviewees were citizens of EU member states or the USA. The interviewees were between the ages of 21 and 60 (although children do walk the trail with their parents no children were interviewed because of ethical constraints). Ten interviewees were female, and eight male. Twelve interviews were conducted in-person in the West Bank, and six via skype once a walker had returned to Europe or USA. They were between 30-45 minutes in length and were either audio or video recorded (depending on the consent of the interviewees) and transcribed verbatim. Grammatical idiosyncrasies in English reflect the different language profiles of the interviewees.

There are two common aspects to the walkers’ experience. All interviewees were walking a trail. A trail does not bring you back to your starting place, instead it introduced the author and the interviewees to places they might not otherwise have chosen to go to. The path itself is agential, and constructive of connection and continuity. This sense of agency is captured by the title of another *Mobilities* article ‘Taming the road, tamed by the road …’ (Meir et al. 2019). In this aspect the walkers’ experiences bear similarities to the routes of the tourist or the pilgrim, and do not resemble the free spirited walks described by Shehadeh:

> To go on a *sarha* was to roam freely, at will, without restraint. The verb form of the word means to let the cattle out to pasture early in the morning, leaving them to wander and graze at liberty. The commonly used noun *sarha* is a colloquial corruption of the classical word. A man going on a *sarha* wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. (2014, 2)

Another aspect was that this walking was not done alone. It was done in the company of other walkers, and led by a Palestinian guide. Although many interviewees talked about how they also appreciated walking alone, a significant element of the experience was walking (and talking) with others.

The interview schedule I developed was based on a set of questions related to the interviewee's previous experience in occupied Palestinian territory; why the walker chose to walk whether at home or in occupied Palestinian territory; and what made the walker feel safe undertaking the walk. In addition, interviewees were asked about a conversation they had had about their planned walk before the walk, a conversation they had during the walk, and lastly a conversation they had about the walk after the walk. They were also asked whether there was any action they planned to take or had taken based on their experience.

The interviewees often were walking with Palestinian walkers but it was the USA and European walkers that are the focus of this research. This distinction between international and local masks diverse experiences and possible relationships. For example, a US citizen could have a Palestinian grandparent, or a European citizen could also identify himself as from the Mediterranean.

Listening to and reflecting on the recorded interviews it was clear to me that walking was experiential. The interviewees' recall of conversations was often not of the words spoken but of an expression or a feeling. Capturing these retrospective perceptions is a methodological challenge: those interviewees who were interviewed

after they had walked were talking about how they recollected feeling. From these recollections I have extrapolated what they articulated and also noted what they left out. For example, most of the interviewees take for granted that walking the *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* will be safe. The absence of the discussion of risk in the majority of the eighteen interviews, is striking.

Findings

The following three sections present my findings related to place, body and story. They show that each of these three concepts can be considered as a verb, as a becoming connected. To follow Tim Cresswell:

> Rather than think of places or landscapes as settings, surfaces or contained spaces through and across which things move, it is perhaps more useful to think about the ongoing processes of 'spacing', 'placing' and 'landscaping' through which the world is shaped and formed. Space, place and landscape are best approached as 'verbs' rather than as 'nouns'. (2010, 7)

Places along the trail become connected to each other. Bodies that are separate and diverse invite solidarity. Stories become connected in an inter-subjective narrative. The three themes around which my findings are organized emerged repeatedly from the interviews: place, people and story. This walker from the Netherlands who has walked stretches of the *Masar* more than twenty times put it this way:

> I think especially in the case of Palestine, as a tourist, if I speak from a foreigner's perspective, there are a lot of places on the *Masar* that you otherwise wouldn't reach... In the desert there are paths that you would never find on your own or just simply would not go down…it is a pathway or an opening to different communities, you can share stories, you can hear stories which you would not otherwise hear.[v]

Place: 'There is no landscape there: they thought there was nothing'

Interviewees were asked about a conversation that they had about their planned walk before they undertook the walk. Numerous interviewees described how when they talked with family, friends and colleagues in their home country and explained that they were going to be walking in occupied Palestinian territory they met with expressions of disbelief. As this German teacher explained 'I said I wanted to meet people there and of course I wanted to enjoy the landscape and to see the landscape. Some told me there is no landscape there: they thought there was nothing.'[vi] By nothing, the implication is that there is nothing attractive, of beauty or of interest.

> Tourists when they think of Palestine they either think of Bethlehem because that is a touristic spot or they think of the conflict and riots on the streets and that's basically it, no one thinks of all the olive trees where flowers are growing underneath and it is such strong symbol in the Palestinian culture but still no one has this landscape in his mind. I sent my parents so many photos of this landscape. They were super surprised. They did not expect especially now because it is so green and everything is blossoming.[vii]

Another interviewee from the USA described how Palestinian American friends were astonished to see pictures that showed places of beauty. 'The friend was so touched and amazed. He told me he was so happy to see these and, at the same time, so envious.' After he returned to the USA, the interviewee was invited to join an annual bonfire event attended by over 100 Palestinian Americans living in his hometown. He talked of his experience of walking the trail. He found it 'amazing to see how hearing about my experience affected them. There was a sense of longing, but also a deep sense of appreciation, [which] brought back to life some lost hope.'[viii]

Hope is associated with the possibility of agency, place-making and space-making. The photos the Palestinian Americans saw not only showed walkers in the

company of Palestinian guides and villagers, they also showed the persistent patient presence of soil, rocks, trees, plants and flowers that were part of the landscape before 1948. The walkers brought out of hiding the myriad other more-than-human elements of the Palestinian ecology (Braun 2005). In February the almond trees are in bloom across northern Galilee.

> Almond blossoms are a celebratory white, adorned with a single pink spot at the base where the petals and stamens join. They cover the tree like satin sleeves, making the branches that shoot into the air seems so light and airy. Each year, ever since the farmers who lived in the villages were forced out, these almond trees have been blossoming, their glorious white flowers marking the approaching end of winter and the coming of spring. (Shehadeh 2011, 82)

Through walking the trail, Palestine is transformed from an abstraction, a territory at risk of negation, to become filled with places of beauty. Not all the places are beautiful: walkers remarked on the rubbish blowing about on the trail between Bethlehem and Tequoah. 'It was not the best hike, it was a suburban area, … deprived … not taken care of.'[ix] The quarries cut out of the hillsides reminded one walker from the USA of the 'mountain-top removal in the Appalachians.'[x]

However even more significant, for the walker, Palestine became not only a world of disconnected beautiful and less beautiful places, it also became an unbounded place, which was not contained by the borders imposed by war and peace accords. The Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 divided the West Bank into Areas A, B and C. In area C, over sixty percent of the West Bank, Israel retained full responsibility for security and public order as well as for civil issues relating to territory (planning and zoning, archaeology, etc). These divisions of the West Bank between three different forms of governance with related restrictions on access restructured Palestinian space (Gordon 2008, 177-180). Israel's control of space allowed it to maintain its monopoly over the

legitimate means of movement. Not only are Palestinians restricted from moving between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the movement of Palestinians inside both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank has been restricted. The measures taken by Israel to fragment the land are extraordinary, but it is the ordinary act of walking from Area A to B to C that reconnects them.

In her studies of walking as protest Rebecca Solnit observes that

> Many people nowadays live in a series of interiors - home, car, gym, office, shops - disconnected from each other. On foot everything stays connected, for while walking one occupies the spaces between those interiors in the same way one occupies those interiors. One lives in the whole world rather than in interiors built up against it. (2014, 9)

Interviewees frequently contrasted their experience of walking to those of an organised tour group travelling by bus.[xi] As one interviewee who had walked the full 330kms said 'You cannot see all landscapes by car, even if you think you can!'[xii]

Some walkers had originally set out to visit particular touristic sites but then found themselves following the trail. For example, one interviewee from Germany had been in Tel Aviv for an academic conference and wanted to visit the monastery of Mar Saba founded in the 5th Century on the edge of the desert, and Wadi Qelt, a limestone path winding from Jerusalem to Jericho. Both of these sites are on the *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* and so the German historian decided to take five days and hike between them, experiencing a night-time walk in the desert en route.[xiii] Although his original purpose was to see specific sites, the walker ended up experiencing the connection between them, including the raw sewage polluting the Kidron stream. The rhizomatic webs of water and waste undermine and overflow any understanding of separation (Braun 2005, 647). As Massey conceived of locality, localities can in a sense be present in one

another, both inside and outside at the same time (1994, 8). Another interviewee described the experience of walking the trail as experiencing one country inside another.

However, just as much as the importance of connection was the importance of the absence of boundaries, the walker could walk for as much, or as little, of the path as he wished. This (male) walker emphasized the possibility of adventure even if the walk lasted for just an hour:

> Of course you have a little adventure, if you hike, you mustn't hike 330kms, even if you hike only one hour you can have a little adventure, you are moving and other people are moving, nature is moving and the landscape is moving. This is my philosophical view of walking.[xiv]

Another female interviewee expressed an experience of expansiveness by saying that when walking there is a possibility of seeing change continually 'like watching time'.[xv]

Emerging from these interviews is an awareness of a Palestinian horizon made up of multiple, connected, overlapping places, each of which is a world in itself. This affective awareness could be described as a thickening of the horizon. It is both human and more-than-human and like the horizon it is an 'almost entity' which stretches without limits.

Body: The people that shaped it

Place means not only connecting but also contiguity. As Göran Therborn says 'a place is where people can meet, can come and can be close to each other' (Therborn 2006, 511). In my discussion of body, and the places of meeting, the emphasis will not only be on connectivity but also that contact was revealing of difference. Walkers anticipated that the home-stay would allow them to go through doors that are normally closed.

> I think it is super important. Because it just opens up views you probably would never get, or only if you are super lucky, and get to know someone who invites you, yes I think it is really important because normally doors are closed and you can't view into the everyday life of people.[xvi]

Within tourism literature home-stays are described as of economical importance, but they also can be seen as allowing Palestinians in villages, far from the political and commercial centres with their securitized international spaces, to make themselves heard.

> I think home-stays are very important, and on the other side on the economical perspective it is also a way of them getting an income, especially in rural villages or areas where there are not a lot of people, it is a kind of voice for them, where they can reach out to foreigners or other Palestinians.[xvii]

The interviews also reflect an awareness of the heterogeneous and contradictory social relations that construct Palestine as a place:

> On the *Masar Ibrahim* you are in different villages not only at the end of each day through different parts of the day, being able to stay with different families. You realise it can look like this in a Palestinian home or it can look like this. And these things are all Palestine. There are different stories, there are different foods, there are different norms in that village.[xviii]

A teacher accompanying a group of students from the USA, who had already experienced a weeklong stay in one home, contrasted the advantages of the longer home-stay with the opportunity to stay with several families along the trail. The variability of home-stays along the trail meant that students did not generalize.[xix]

The same dynamic of breaking down general impressions was happening between the hosts and the international interveners. One walker explained how the Palestinian hosts assumed that all 'foreigners' knew each other; that they would be comfortable sharing close spaces, close beds, changing clothes, etc.[xx]

All interviewees commented on the different gender relations that they observed. ‘Passing through a room at a home-stay or site visit where there are women versus not even seeing the women at all in others. In some, it was totally comfortable. In others, it was very different.’[xxi] Other interviewees commented on the way in which place structured gender relations. While one female interviewee was very comfortable being helped to clamber up rocks, she observed that she would have been less comfortable if an unknown passenger in a shared-taxi had given her a hand out of the taxi.

> During scrambling up the mountain, it was a relaxed atmosphere. There were a lot of jokes: people (particularly the ‘strong men’ of the group) formed a line stationed at various challenging spots to make sure each person made it up. It was so harmonious and there was no air of misogyny.[xxii]

Two male walkers, one from the USA in his 20s and one Palestinian in his 60s bonded as they walked the trail together for eight days of the trail. They discussed meditation practices. As the US American said ‘it was amazing to be able to discuss this with someone like this unexpectedly.’ He also described how they discussed what it means to be a young person and how to ‘orient’ your life. There was a father-son dynamic, given the age difference, but this dynamic was also friend-like. It was human-to-human, person-to-person, not ‘Bedouin’ and ‘foreigner’.[xxiii] Numerous writers on walking have commented on the companionable formation where ‘conversation and embodied gestures happen side-by-side rather than face-to-face’ (Lorrimer 2016, 28).

This friend-like conversation bears similarities to the conversations among Palestinian refugee women discussed by Ruba Salih (2017). While walkers did report that initial conversations were characterised by complaint and a rush to nationalist assertions, these developed into conversations that escaped what Salih calls ‘the nationalist grid’, and highlighted instead the ethics of care, the desire to make a home and the ‘affects nested in the concreteness of ordinary relations, attachments and

responsibilities.' In the walkers' interviews as many of the male, as female, walkers reported conversations related to the responsibilities of making a home.

> One of the principles that I set out for the Palestine walk for me was in a sense not to discuss the conflict, but just to listen to the conflict, that was sometimes a hard lesson for me just to listen and not to start to make proposals of what to do about the conflict, just basically listen to it, and to find out that people in Palestine have difficulties, in shall I start a family, shall I build a house, not really knowing is it sustainable in the long term, and these very personal problems are not that different from problems that you have.[xxiv]

As they followed the trail or shared a meal, walkers discussed life-changing events (the passing of parents' generation) and aspirations (building a house) but what emerged most vividly was how they *felt* about their lives. It is this affective horizon where alternative stories that go beyond the collective nationalist narrative can be found.

Co-created story

As Selimovic (2018) emphasised 'stories are told to others and are therefore never isolated but intersubjectively constituted.' For this reason my final section is titled the 'co-created' story. Central to these interviews were questions related to the conversations the walkers had while walking. On the trail time was open-ended. Many described it as a safe space for topics that were expected and unexpected: silences were comfortable.

> The importance of walking for me is that the speed that I hike gets into harmony with the speed that I think, and the speed that I feel, and it really allows me to slow down, that I can deeply process thoughts and feelings that are coming up, and it deeply allows me to get in sync with hikers of the group that are around me, and all the conversations during a hike, that start, and then break for a short moment, and the people who are talking together, especially in groups, then get reshuffled, and

> then after a couple of hours, or even a day or two, you can talk with the same person as you have talked two days ago, and a lot of time I experienced that the old conversation gets started again exactly at the same time that it has stopped, at first I had to learn about this because I thought heh we didn't finish our conversation, but I learned that this is some very natural way and some easy way to talk more or less with everyone more or less all the time, but it is not crowded there seems to be some rhythm in it.[xxv]

Interviewees commented on the way they had experiences without the constant presence of technology:

> I really do think that the separation from technology it changes the way we interpret the experience, and the fact that it is not just that it is not broken up every five minutes, ten minutes, it really changes the degree to which students are present and able to engage.[xxvi]

Most striking was the way in which the interviewees spoke about the experience of walking, and how they experienced encounters with other people. How the other person made them feel, or how the walker perceived the other person to feel, was more lasting than what was said. Selimovic selects three ethnographic moments for analysis according to a conceptual grid of place, body and story. She argues convincingly that story provides a sense of belonging: 'personal, embodied experiences are enfolded into and related to collective narratives that hold ethical and political meaning.' According to Selimovic the acts she witnesses 'are more or less overtly knitted into a narrative weave that connects them to the prominent Palestinian, nationalistically infused, narrative of collective suffering, resistance and stoicism.' The way in which the walkers recollect their encounters suggests alternative narratives, closer to the affective attachments, proximity and intimacy of the women interviewed by Salih (2017). Nationalist narratives make uniform Palestinian voices, in the same way that theoretical discourse asserts that this is always and everywhere the case, by contrast stories, which

begin ‘once upon a time’, disclose what Hannah Arendt referred to as ‘who’ rather than ‘what’. ‘This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and short- comings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does.’ (Arendt 1958, 179)

> And I think just as much as any of the specific conversations on the specific things that you remember from any home-stay I think what is really powerful as well the parts that you don’t remember the exact words, you remember the sentiment that someone was feeling, you remember the expression on their face, the way they felt about what they were saying, that is what you can’t, that’s what no text book can communicate in the same way, that’s what no lecture is accomplishing as much as that raw human emotion and expression.[xxvii]

By paying attention to the ‘I perceive’ the walkers experience their own physical contingency and the ongoing social and relational spaces which people inhabit. This experiential learning encroaches upon the ‘I think’ and the narratives of well-worn words and binarized positions, and encourages the thinking in terms of relations which Massey identified as the potential for solidarities and that Qassoum (2017, 40) identified as critical to an alternative politics of self determination.

Significance of the findings for changes in practice: Learning to deal with it

The focus of this research has been the international visitors to the trail, not the Palestinian guides or host communities or other Palestinians met along the way. Are the walkers of the *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* transformed by the experience of walking the trail, and if so, how? To what extent do their activities constitute an alternative politics of social transformation? There is a danger in overemphasising the potential of walking this trail. It would require a longitudinal study to draw robust conclusions and even then attributing impact would be challenging. However, the walkers certainly do not go home and forget about it. Two outcomes of walking the trail stand out from the

interviewees' responses. They all said that they had chosen to tell the story of their experiences through organised events, film or journalism, or through speaking informally to family, friends and colleagues. Many also reported that the experience of walking the trail left them less goal oriented and more attentive to the process through which incremental change happens. This is significant because it opens up the possibility of a paradigm shift in the way that these international interveners talk about change.

> As much as I am probably through my job I am goal oriented, so I always wanted to reach the stay, wherever we would stay during lunchtime or where we are going to stay overnight, but really over a couple of days really the walking becomes the important part, not where we have lunch or where we will stay, it is the walking, being on the path that we walk.[xxviii]

The same interviewee reported that he was more relaxed about not having a prescribed solution, not knowing the A…Z of how to exit the conflict. The here and now had become more important. In his Little Book of Conflict Transformation Lederach reminds the reader that we are not able to handle complexity well unless we identify ' the key energies in a situation and hold them up together as interdependent goals' (2003, 51). The way in which the walkers inhabit the present echoes the thinking of Lederach in his criticism of the linear processes that lead up to peace agreements.

> Solutions create a way out, an exit from an episodic issue. This clearly alleviates systemic anxiety at any given moment, but must not be mistaken for the capacity to generate processes and solution in an ongoing way. Agreements may solve a specific problem. (2005, 49)

By contrast, Lederach goes on to say 'platforms… generate processes that produce solutions and potentially transform the epicentre of relationships in context' (2005, 49). It could be said that walkers experienced the Masar as a platform because

interviewees talked about listening to the conflict, approaching it indirectly and learning in such a way that gave them a perspective that they did not have already, in other words the ongoing social and relational space in which they found themselves was transformed.

> I am not an activist, I never was, I have my opinion on the conflict, and sometimes I get pissed off at the situation, like I told you, but I was never someone who would do a geopolitical tour of Palestine because I know exactly what I would find and it would piss me off even more, so learning approaching the conflict indirectly by just talking to the people living here in a wonderful landscape it is a totally new experience
>
> It is actually more learning to deal with it.[xxix]

These walkers did not see themselves as activists. There are other international walkers who do: the volunteers of the Christian Peacemakers Teams, The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme Palestine Israel, and Operation Dove (the Nonviolent Peace Corps of the Pope John XXIII Community) all go on foot, choosing to make themselves vulnerable better to fulfil their roles as human rights defenders and to address directly both the overwhelming coercive military power of the Israeli occupation and the discriminatory legal and administrative structures of violence.

This research has also passed over the experience of Palestinian walkers. Often Palestinian walkers were part of the group and occasionally hundreds of Palestinians from the Right to Movement team up with the *Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil*. This is another research topic, however, interviews with Palestinian walkers suggest that they too have the expansive experience of worlds within worlds when walking. Here is one example from a Palestinian walker:

> In general, I know about Palestine's geography but I have not been to areas like Arab Al Rashayda. But when I did visit, I not only gained knowledge about its

> geographic context but I also learned something new. I learned how these far away places came to existence and how they managed to put themselves on the map and tell the world that they exist and to come see them…people in Palestine and from across the world come here with interest. This is a new understanding about our country, for me.[xxx]

The object of this research has been the social *nonmovement*, to borrow a term from Asef Bayat (2010,14), of walkers from the USA and Europe and their Palestinian hosts. By nonmovement Bayat refers to the fragmented, individual actions of noncollective actors. He describes this as 'the type of fluid, flexible, and self-producing strategy that is adopted not only by the urban poor, but also by other subaltern groups, including middle-class women.' The work of Bayat tells 'the story of agency in the times of constraints' (2010, 20). By drawing attention to the unnoticed social practices through which people express agency and exercise dignity, without resorting to violence, Bayat builds the case for considering these mundane practices to be the harbinger of significant social changes (2010, 56). Whether the practice of walking in Palestine amounts to predictive social action of this kind has been the question at the heart of this research.

Conclusion

The international walkers who make up this nonmovement are not courageous, they walk for leisure and companionship, but this social nonmovement can have political consequences. Bourdieu argued that an established order, if it is successful, must make its world seem to be the natural world (Bourdieu 1977). This dimension of power can be seen in the embrace of ideologies and taken-for-granted patterns of behaviour. Audrey Reeves has demonstrated how the Israeli government has an interest in defending the taken-for-grantedness of the need for armed guards at tourist destinations. The interview

responses from the walkers on the *Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil* show that the walkers all take for granted that they will be safe walking in the company of others and with an (unarmed) Palestinian guide. The action of a few initiators gives confidence to those who follow and who reproduce the norm. Interviewees recounted how information about walking the *Masar* was passed on through conversations at the workplace, or in the evening at the gym, or via skype in a call home. These conversations often started from the premise that walking in occupied Palestinian territory was unsafe, and then as the experienced walker told his or her story concerns over safety were allayed, and the trail was opened up to new people to experience it. Walking this trail both demonstrates how powerful and conflicting forms of order and transgression compete in the same space, and how an ideology takes hold of, and is maintained through, everyday activity.

The degree to which this practice of walking is disruptive of the dominant taken-for-granted order of things, can be seen if it is contrasted with the carefully choreographed tourist movements that are the object of Reeves' research. Reeves elegantly demonstrated the relationship between critical security studies and the mobility turn in her article 'Mobilising bodies, narrating security: tourist choreographies at Jerusalem's Holocaust History Museum' (2018). She showed how the tourists' experience of embodied mobility at sites commemorating mass violence and atrocity contribute to the (re)production of transnational security discourses in which sovereignty over territory is combined with the legitimate deployment of armed force. A realist, Hobbesian perspective, and an assumption of the permanence of the security dilemma between identity groups that can only be resolved, or managed, by the threat of state-sanctioned violence, generate these security discourses.

Instead of a discourse in which national sovereignty over spatial territory is combined with the legitimacy of the deployment of armed force, there emerges from my

findings a discourse of place which is porous and in which the carrying of arms is perceived as transgressive and out of place (Cresswell 1996). Walking the *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* encourages what Cresswell called a way of seeing which 'can seem to be an act of resistance against a rationalization of the world that focuses more on space than place' (Cresswell 2004, 18). The international interveners' imagined normative landscape of binational spatial segregation in which 'ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space' (Cresswell 1996, 9) is unsettled by this experience. Just as Reeves has shown that the tourists' embodied experience at the Holocaust Museum reinforces taken-for-granted ideas about segregation and containment, the affective experiences of the walkers that are the subject of this article have the power to generate an alternative normative landscape within which segregation and containment are viewed as repressive and retrograde.

At its southern most point the *Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil* is blocked by the seven-metre high Israeli built Separation Wall. Compliance with this zero-sum power means the walkers with permission to enter Israel have to part company with their Palestinian walking companions who carry West Bank identity documents and have not been granted permission to enter Israel. From the Wall the path is still visible on the other side, following the folds of the hills down to the Negev, the Gaza Strip and the sea beyond. In places where there is no Wall the Bedouin guide knows where the 1949 Armistice border lies, but it is not visible to the walkers. All these pedestrian journeys are thickening the Palestinian horizon. That horizon is an 'almost entity' made up of multiple experiences. It is a place that can only be conceived of by engaging with, deconstructing, and finding an alternative to the security discourses of territory and nationalism, based on the experience of a place inside another place, social relations that invite solidarity, and inclusive stories of affect, proximity and home.

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[i] Stefan Szepesi worked with the Office of the Special Representative of the Quartet in Jerusalem for five years. As a keen walker and cyclist he spent his leisure time exploring the West Bank. He encouraged others to go with him and out of their weekend walks came the book *Walking Palestine: 25 Journeys into the West Bank* Stefan Szepesi 1979-, *Walking Palestine : 25 Journeys into the West Bank / Stefan Szepesi* (Oxford: Oxford : Signal Books, 2012, 2012).. He became the Executive Director of Abraham Path Initiative in 2012.

[ii]http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/304191468337814036/pdf/839080PJPR0P140SE0ADD0THE0ABSTRACT.pdf

[iii] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/761131496943874637/pdf/ISR-Disclosable-P147235-06-08-2017-1496943866359.pdf

[iv] Barghūthī wrote of Jerusalem that "this is the city of our senses, our bodies and our childhood." Murīd Barghūthī, *I Saw Ramallah* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).:143

[v] Netherlands citizen, male, has walked more than 20 times on Masar Ibrahim

[vi] German citizen, male, 21 days walk Rumana to Beir Mersin

[vii] German citizen, female, after walking Duma to Kufr Malik

[viii] US citizen, age 24, male, 21 days Rumanna to Beit Mirsim,

[ix] Spanish citizen, male, after walking Bethlehem to Tequoah

[x] US citizen, female, after walking 5 days Bani Naim to Beit Mirsim

[xi] German citizen, female, 1 day walk Auja to Kfur Malek

[xii] Norwegian citizen, female, age 31, 17 days walk Sebastiya to Beit Mirsim

[xiii] Spanish citizen, male, 21 days walk Rumanna to Beit Mirsim

[xiv] German citizen, male, 21 days walk Rumanna to Beir Mersin

[xv] US citizen, female, 5 days walk Burqin to Jericho

[xvi] German citizen, female, prior to walking Duma to Kufr Malik

[xvii] Netherlands citizen, male, has walked more than 20 times on Masar Ibrahim

[xviii] US citizen, female, after walking 5 days ending at Bethlehem

[xix] US, female, 26, 5 days walk

[xx] Spanish, male, 30s, 21 days Rumanna to Beit Mirsim

[xxi] US, male, 24, 21 days Rumanna to Beit Mirsim

[xxii] German, female, 26, 1 day Auja to Kfur Malek

[xxiii] US, male, 24, 21 days Rumanna to Beit Mirsim

[xxiv] German citizen, male, after walking 5 days Burqin to Jericho and sea level

[xxv] German citizen, male, after walking 5 days Burqin to Jericho and sea level

[xxvi] US, female, 26, 5 days walk

[xxvii] US, female, 26, 5 days walk

[xxviii]German citizen, male, after walking 5 days Burqin to Jericho and sea level

[xxix] Belgian citizen, female, after walking all sections at least once

[xxx] Palestinian, male, Arab Rashayda

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